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Gender and capacity building: A multi-layered study of empowerment

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ABSTRACT

This study shifts the focus from building individual capacities to understanding the relational acts through which empowerment and education acquire their value and meaning. Conceptually, the paper employs social cognitive theory to explore the interplay between social learning, relational agency, and culture. This interplay builds the foundation for the development of an empowerment model of capacity building that proposes an interlinked system of community capacity and empowerment dimensions. The model is explored in the context of the Education for All project in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. The research combines participant observation, qualitative interviews and visual methods to provide rich insights to situated knowledges of learning and empowerment. Findings reveal that the meaning of education equates to the capacity to aspire to a different life. This problematizes the way gender and gender relations are understood in the rural Berber villages. The girls' education unsettles the repeating cycle of female educational deprivation, and leads them to become role models within their communities. This instills the image of educated women in community consciousness, leading to an incipient change in perceptions of what girls and women can be and do.

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1. Introduction

This study engages with the micro-politics of gender and learning to investigate how capacity building in rural communities can enhance empowerment. It explores the complex interdependencies between individual and collective community capacities and the ways in which these also engender experiences of disempowerment. Traditional approaches to capacity building emphasize the role of education and training in knowledge transfer (Vallejo & Wehn, 2016). Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, and Vidal (2001, p. 7) define the term capacity as building on the notion “of both containing (holding, storing) and ability (of mind, of action).” This definition reflects the belief that some resources or capitals, such as human or physical capital, are readily available within a community. However, the underlying concept – that needed resources “reside” both within the individual and the collective, and that community capacity provides the foundation of these processes – is also problematic. It fails to capture the ways in which community capacities are not equally available, accessible and distributed among social groups. The terms capacity building, community development, and empowerment are often used interchangeably

to describe “a process that increases the assets and attributes which a community is able to draw upon in order to improve their lives” (Gibbon, Labonte, & Laverack, 2002, p. 485). This conflation indicates that a well-defined conceptualization of the relationship between capacity building and empowerment and their respective effects on development is missing.

Understanding the underlying community dynamics that drive these processes can be considered a pre-condition for identifying and engaging in effective capacity building. Far from representing homogenous or stable groups (Botchway, 2001), communities are defined by geographical and socio-cultural factors. Within them, social groups have different attributes and endowments of assets (Chaskin et al., 2001). In particular, women and girls are often disadvantaged in access to training and education (World Bank, 2011). There are, however, limited ethnographic studies of educational initiatives for girls (Shah, 2016). These could provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities underpinning learning and empowerment (see also Moreno, Noguchi, & Harder, 2017).

This research aims to address this gap by studying capacity building within the context of the “Education for All” (EFA) project. The project provides boarding houses for girls from poor families living in remote villages of the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. It was established in 2007 by tourism organizations operating in the area with the intention of improving female access to education. At present, five boarding houses operate in Asni, Ouirgane

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and Talat n'Yacoub in the province of Al-Haouz in the Marrakech-Safi region. Each house accommodates 30 to 36 girls, who are between ages 12 and 19. Almost all students are Berber and Muslim, reflecting the demographic composition of the area. The complex manifestations of both Islam and oral Berber culture influence local gender norms and community hierarchies (Sadiqi, 2003).

The theme of the project harmonizes with the “Education for All” goals of the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000). However, while the latter focus exclusively on schools, most of the capacity development in the EfA project occurs outside the classroom. The EfA learning philosophy is based on providing individualized care and support and a cooperative learning environment for girls. It operates in a culturally conforming way as a predominantly female environment. The project further relies on international volunteers who serve as mentors and role models for the girls. These interpersonal learning processes cater not only to the girls' schooling needs, but also to the goal of enabling girls to become confident, capable and aware young women.

This research explores the ways in which education can bring opportunity and capacity building for girls. It provides three original contributions to theory and knowledge. First, it critiques existing conceptualizations of community capacity that focus predominantly on community assets and attributes. Instead, this paper adopts a lens that interlinks empowerment dimensions and community capacities on different levels. Second, it draws on social cognitive theory to broaden the understanding of socially embedded and networked learning and empowerment processes. Third, it expands the current empirical literature in this field, which focuses predominantly on adults. The paper provides an in-depth examination of girls' capacity development in Berber communities, and analyzes the ensuing effects on gender dynamics and community capacities.

To present key, original contributions, the paper proceeds as follows: The first section presents a literature review that examines the diverse and intersectional experiences of learning and empowerment, and builds the foundation for the development of an empowerment model of capacity building. The second section presents the methodology guiding this research. The third section discusses the findings. The final section concludes, reflects on the limitations of this study, and indicates potential areas for future research.

2. Capacity building through the lens of empowerment

Education is one of the main factors contributing to women's empowerment, as highlighted in the “Gender Equality and Development Report 2012” (World Bank, 2011). Education increases individuals' overall access to opportunities in life, and is considered a key correlate of empowerment (Gammage, Kabeer, & Rodgers, 2016; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Samman & Santos, 2009; Subrahmanian, 2005). However, formal educational systems also replicate social norms, dominant values and drivers. These can further entrench inequality and disempowerment in society by reproducing existing hierarchies and exclusions (Bivens, Moriarty, & Taylor, 2009). An assessment of educational processes requires an engagement with the in/formal geographies underpinning learning experiences and the negotiation of community capacities and values therein. This study focuses on education as a form of capacity development that builds on cognitive, social and cultural processes. It thereby transcends the formal and informal structures of both school and community to explore opportunities for growth, aspiration and empowerment of girls. A short introduction to the concepts and theories informing the empowerment model of capacity building developed in this study follows (see Fig. 1).

2.1. Capacity-building theory

Capacity building is most commonly defined as a process having different dimensions or levels complemented by a specific aim (Simmons, Reynolds, & Swinburn, 2011). Attributes of community capacity apply to persons, and to broader communities in ways that surpass the individual and encompass relationships and groups (Kwan, Frankish, Quantz, & Flores, 2003). Community capacity building is further based on specific capitals or domains. Authors usually describe between four and nine aspects, such as skills and knowledge, sense of community, social structures, resources, participation, leadership, and community awareness (see e.g. Chaskin et al., 2001; Gibbon et al., 2002). This conceptualization reflects that capacity-building processes rely and build on existing abilities or capabilities within a community and on available resources (cf. Vallejo & Wehn, 2016). Chaskin et al. (2001) find a lack of clarity on how these different aspects relate to each other (for a rare exception, see Moreno et al., 2017). The model in Fig. 1 shows how the mutually imbricated processes of empowerment and learning are influenced by and influence community capacities at different levels.

2.2. Social cognitive theory

Social cognitive theory provides an avenue through which to study not only environmental determinants, but also the psychological foundations of learning and implicit empowerment (Bandura, 1997). This provides a perspective of capacity development that is sensitive to cultural experiences, reflective thought, and the social embeddedness of change. Social cognitive theory acknowledges the influence of local culture on constructions of knowledge and meaning making (Vygotsky, 1978). It holds that social interaction is key to a person's cognitive development by emphasizing the role of guided and observational learning through social modeling (Bandura, 1998). It focuses on “developmental changes across the life span in terms of involvement and exercise of human agency” (Bandura, 2006, p. 1). Self-efficacy beliefs function as a key mechanism of agency. They represent the perceived capacity to act, which influences human functioning through motivational, cognitive and affective processes (Bandura, 1991). This underpins the exercise of control that rests on individuals or groups' belief in their causative capability (Bandura, 1997).

2.3. Empowerment theory

Empowerment, like capacity building, is a multilevel construct that includes both processes and outcomes. This study explores empowerment on three interconnected levels: the individual, relationship and collective (adapted from Rowlands, 1997). It integrates an agentic perspective of the self in line with the broader definition of empowerment as “the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life” (Narayan, 2002, p. xviii). Motivated by Sen's capability approach (1985, 1999), many scholars emphasize the importance of agency in conceptions of empowerment (see e.g. Gammage et al., 2016; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Samman & Santos, 2009). This study focuses on the development of agency along a control-choice continuum ranging from a person or a group's perceived inability to act or choose, and toward an increasing sense of control over taking certain actions (Bandura, 1997) and making certain choices (Kabeer, 2005). This is an inherently relational process (cf. Christens, 2012; Rao, 2017) shaped by changes from within, i.e., psychological empowerment, and socio-structural influences operating through the terms of recognition (adapted from Appadurai, 2004). These terms capture the dynamic interaction between empowerment processes, values, norms and discourses that are

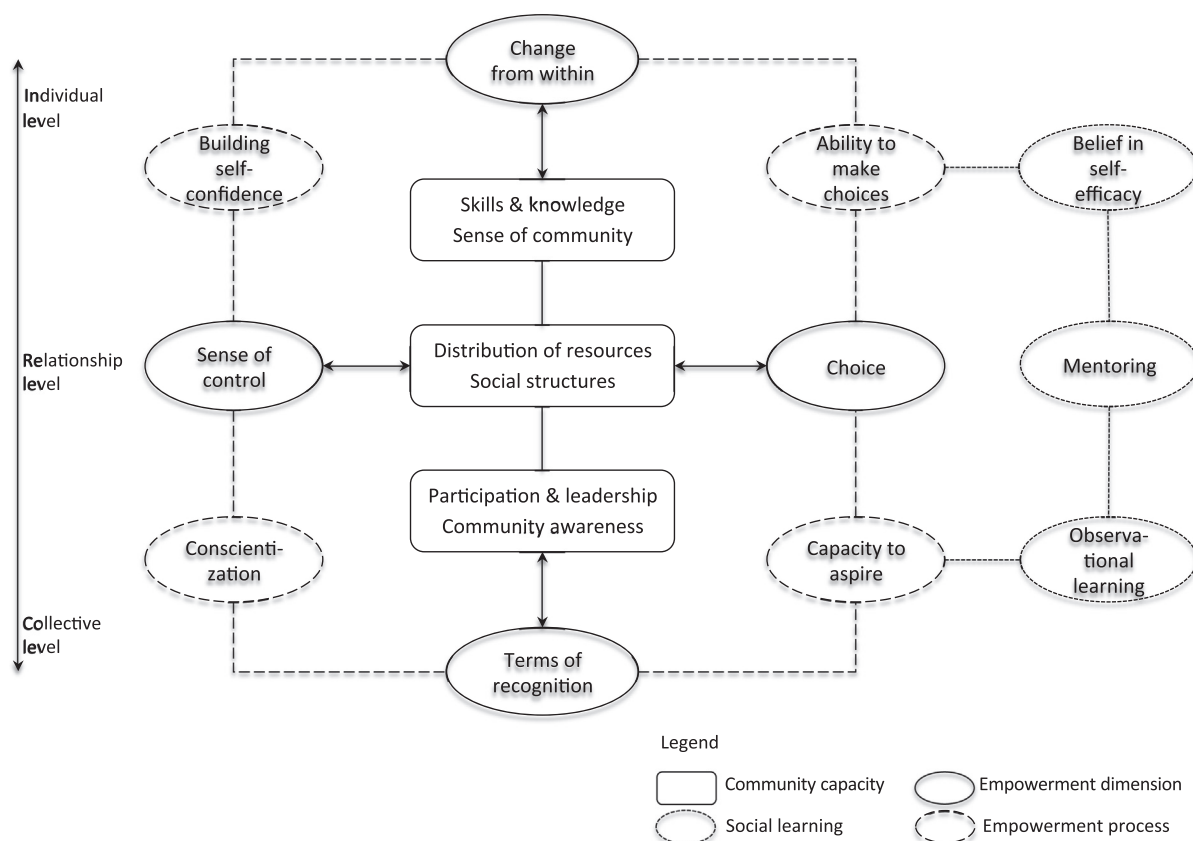


Fig. 1. Empowerment model of capacity building. Source: Authors, partly based on work by Appadurai, 2004; Bandura, 1997; Kabeer, 2005; Kwan et al., 2003; Rowlands, 1997.

inscribed in community capacity and in turn, circumscribe capacity development.

Fig. 1 illustrates the complex interconnections between changes from within and wider interpersonal and collective changes. The next sections develop the conceptual underpinning of the model.

2.4. Change from within

Education in its different forms is key in developing human capacities (Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash, 2014; Nussbaum, 2003). It changes individuals' cognitive ability and self-confidence "to question, to reflect on, and to act on the conditions of their lives and to gain access to knowledge, information, and new ideas that will allow them to do so" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 16). The growth of cognitive competencies is shaped by culture and arises from social processes (Vygotsky, 1978) that help individuals adjust to and modify their environment (Bandura, 1997). The belief about self-capacity represents an important mechanism of agency (Bandura, 1991), and relates to increasing feelings of control and competence (see Zimmerman, Stewart, Morrel-Samuels, Franzen, & Reischl, 2011). These psychological processes of empowerment accompany the opening up of mental spaces through the "cultivation of powers of thought and expression that might otherwise go neglected" (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 335).

Childhood represents a particularly important time in which personal and social identities are formed (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2004). Social identity entails the ascription of roles that are inherently gendered, and expectations that involve significant internal and external commitments (Okkolin, 2016; Shah, 2016). Access to role models and other groups through schooling and capacity building can nourish the development of alternative

selves and strengthen sense of belonging and solidarity (see e.g. Kabeer, 2011). While being a universal human capacity, social modeling also represents a cultural and socially structured practice (Bandura, 2006). This hints at the less tangible informal learning processes through which individuals acquire an increasing sense of efficacy. Extended peer networks often build the foundation of these processes and "associated feelings such as confidence derived from group membership" (Christens, 2012, p. 118).

Nussbaum (2003, p. 335) connects education with prestige and social status through the "ability to form social relationships on a basis of equality with others." Choudhary (2016) stipulates that for education to have an effect on women's valuation within society, girls need to reach at least secondary level. Similarly, Hanmer and Klugman (2016) find different threshold effects depending on women's level of education in a study of agency deprivations in 55 developing countries. While the barriers and constraints to increasing empowerment differ from community to community and even within communities, "women with higher education are less likely to be restricted" (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016, p. 253). In turn, those experiencing greater (social) mobility can bring knowledge to the community, and can change the level of understanding of otherness and social exclusion. This reflects the multiplicity of forces and avenues of capacity building and empowerment, which in concert can facilitate changes for the individual.

2.5. Sense of control and choice

This research builds on a multidimensional conceptualization of empowerment, which focuses on empowerment in relationships through a control-choice continuum drawing on the work of

Bandura (1997) and Kabeer (2005). Individuals' sense of control influences their ability to make choices, and is inherently linked with the aforementioned changes from within. However, different authors have argued for a relational rather than individual-level understanding of gender empowerment and capacity development (Christens, 2012; Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Hall, 2017; Rao, 2017; Shah, 2016; Uyan-Semerci, 2007). This study explores how individuals and groups acquire an increasing ability to act and to make choices they value in and through relationships. This is in line with Sen's (cf. 1985, p. 203) definition of agency, but shifts the focus toward a relational understanding of agency. This study draws on social cognitive theory to operationalize the cultural and relational processes through which education can foster agency.

In the context of social learning, development moves from the social to the individual (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). Mutually interdependent processes of learning and socialization take place at home, in the collective, and, in the case of many African communities, through exclusively oral customs (Fennell & Arnot, 2008). Cultural learning, which intersects with the "task of legitimating and distributing various cultural forms," socializes individuals into community practices (Baker et al., 2004, p. 144). These processes tacitly inform the valuation and construction of choice (and gender), influencing individuals and groups' perceived ability to act. In particular, traditional societies often limit sociocultural space, which in turn restrains mental space (Deshmukh-Ranadive, 2005). Observational learning processes can inform new response patterns based on the behavioral features displayed by others (Bandura, 1977). For example, more knowledgeable others and mentors play an important role in enhancing individuals' sense of control and understanding of adult roles (Zimmerman et al., 2011).

Relational experiences of agency contribute to a stronger sense of collective efficacy (see Bandura, 1997; Rao, 2017) and envisioning of the future. Collective efficacy is however not the sum of efficacy beliefs. Rather, it emerges as a relationship-level characteristic based on interactive and collaborative dynamics (Bandura, 1997). Transforming the ways in which choice interacts with culture supports individuals and groups in moving out of patterns of passivity. These processes are not always in line with community expectations. Social structures and the relationships they embody and "reproduce," represent the parameters of the control-choice continuum. They emerge in local organizations and institutions, and in the form of norms, rules and customs governing communities (Narayan, 2005). Over time, they become engrained in local discourses representing accepted ideologies that build the foundation of power relations in the community (Baker et al., 2004).

Developing the capacity to aspire represents both a cultural and empowering process in this context. Aspiration denotes what is of value and meaning to individuals (Hart, 2016) and groups. An increased sense of control and shared purpose supports the development of aspirations. This "can unlock the agency that is needed" (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013, p. 565) to overcome gendered constraints to aspirations (DeJaeghere, 2016). This process is not "simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think). They [aspirations] are always formed in interaction" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 67) and depend on the terms of recognition.

2.6. Terms of recognition

The terms of recognition form part of the cultural framework governing communities, and determine the basis on which collectives engage (adapted from Appadurai, 2004). Community leadership and participation often serve as (pre)requisites for effective capacity building (Chaskin, 2001). Wide participation, including youths' active engagement in community change, enhances capac-

ity across different levels (see Zimmerman et al., 2011). Friendship groups and peer networks can provide pathways to gain status (Fennell & Arnot, 2008), and to initiate processes of knowledge sharing and collective learning. However, increased (gender) equality at the local level does not automatically follow (Friedmann, 1992).

Empowerment "has to take some local cultural form to have resonance, mobilize adherents, and capture the public space of debate" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 67). The terms of recognition critically engage with the circumstances and restraints under which socially marginalized groups negotiate with values, norms and discourses that shape their everyday lives (Appadurai, 2004; see also Ray, 2016). This connects with the initial argument that in order to build capacities at the local level a more critical engagement with community capacities and gender negotiations is required. Bockstael (2017) highlights the importance of enabling community members to challenge the status quo. This calls for measures that are "both gender-aware and transformative of gender relations in the ways in which they operate, within the possibilities offered by the environment in question" (Subrahmanian, 2005, p. 406).

Although education does not directly change the values and norms underpinning evaluations of gender (Choudhary, 2016), Freire (1974, 1998) highlights the role of education (and literacy) in building individual and collective capabilities for creating social transformation. The emancipatory capacity of learning lies in its capacity to instill a desire for and belief in change that can extend to the collective through wider processes of conscientization (see Freire, 1974). The concept of conscientization links education with increasing awareness and understanding of the sociocultural environment. Conscientization builds the foundation for critical capacity development. It grounds learning processes in participants' reality (Bockstael, 2017), and strengthens the ability to question "received" knowledge, including dominant gender ideologies and perceptions of entitlement (Sen, 1999, p. 193). Conscientization requires overcoming the internalized discourses underpinning unequal terms of recognition. This process might enable not only change from within, but also the ability to turn capacities into capabilities that lead to wider transformations at the collective level.

This section discussed the complex interrelationships between social learning, empowerment and wider community development captured in the empowerment model of capacity building (see Fig. 1). The model shows that individual empowerment is related to changes from within that can alter the sense of self and community. Empowerment in relationships is determined through a continuum of control and choice that is negotiated through community structures and access to resources. The collective level of empowerment is defined by the terms of recognition. These terms represent both empowering and disempowering dimensions. In order to understand these complexities, a range of methods has been adopted. These are presented next.

3. Methodology

This research employs an embedded case study approach (Yin, 2014) focusing on the EfA project in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. This enables a critical and empathic study of the social and cultural context in which interaction and learning occur. The data-collection process relied on six-months of fieldwork conducted in the EfA boarding houses in Asni, Ouirgane and Talat n'Yacoub and the surrounding Berber communities. The fieldwork aimed at studying the spaces for and experiences of empowerment and learning within the EfA project, and the ways in which these interact with community capacity. The data-collection process consisted of two main research phases relying on qualitative

semi-structured interviews, participant observation and visual methods (Pink, 2001). The research used purposive sampling strategies to identify participants, and employed data triangulation to add rigor (see King & Horrocks, 2010).

The first research phase took place from January to April 2014, and consisted of working as a volunteer and researcher at the EfA project. Being a volunteer allowed the researcher to transcend the role of observer becoming a participant-as-observer through actively engaging with research participants (Flick, 2009). This created spaces for affective participation where closeness and emotional involvement of the researcher fostered empathy with the girls. In the second research phase, which took place from May to June 2014, the researcher lived in the surrounding communities to understand the wider effects of the project on community development. This period provided insights into the negotiation of community capacities that underpin the processes and potential outcomes of empowerment. Table 1 provides an outline of the data collected during the two research phases.

3.1. First research phase

In the first research phase the researcher conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 75 girls at the boarding houses, and with four staff members. The collaborative nature of these interviews allowed for exploring emerging topics; the participants' answers actively shaped the meaning-making process. Conversations with staff members explored the opportunities and challenges encountered within the project. These discussions related to the housemothers' perceptions of the EfA project, and to the responses received from the wider community. In addition, conversations addressed the involvement of donors. This allowed for assessing the development of the project over time, while gaining an understanding of the complex roles that the housemothers occupy.

The research with school-aged children used visual methods to facilitate communication and knowledge sharing. Visual images relate to different fields of knowledge (Pink, 2001), including bodily experiences, memory, feelings and emotions (Scarles, 2010). Respondent-led photo-elicitation provided the girls with an added sense of agency in the interview process (Kearney & Hyle, 2004). The researcher asked girls to choose between five and 10 pictures that reflected their experiences at the EfA project and the meaning of education and learning in their lives. The girls, who were afforded relative autonomy to select the pictures they deemed important, subsequently discussed these photos during interviews. This form of "photo-voice" facilitates alternative forms of engagement (Vince & Warren, 2012). However, some girls did not feel comfortable in sharing their experiences through photographs, and others did not adhere to the instructions given. This required a degree of

flexibility to adapt interviews to respondents' personalities and preferences for communicating and expressing themselves.

The research relied on an original approach to investigate the girls' future aspirations and conceptions of self. It used extra-curricular research activities combined with drawing-elicitation (see Kearney & Hyle, 2004). This method provided spaces for creativity and self-reflexive expression. Twenty-six girls at three different boarding houses participated in the drawing activities, which asked them to draw how they saw themselves and the persons or things important for them in the present and future. Harper (2002) describes the use of visual-elicitation methods along a continuum starting from a focus on highly scientific images, moving to a middle position centered on the institutional/collective, and culminating with the family/intimate dimension. Using this method allowed this research, to connect with participants' lifeworlds, and to elicit emotions and feelings, which sometimes are difficult to describe in words (Vince & Warren, 2012).

3.2. Second research phase

During the second research phase the researcher conducted participant observation in the surrounding communities of the EfA project. This research phase focused on how community members "do gender," and how gender intersects with other experiences of age, ethnicity and religion. This period was crucial for developing a better understanding of how change can be achieved through the capacities and resources experienced at different societal levels through educated women. Interviews, conducted with 63 community members in the surrounding villages, explored the broader peer and community effects of the girls' education and empowerment. Conversations with respondents emphasized different aspects of these issues, including conceptions of gendered responsibilities and discourses, and intersections between education and community development. The conversations reflect the fluid process of research, in which interview questions are adapted and altered to capture new meanings and alternative areas that require further investigation.

Analysis of the data used a three-staged thematic analysis approach that relied upon descriptive coding, thematic coding and a final stage of coding to identify overarching patterns (see King & Horrocks, 2010). A qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 10, supported the iterative coding processes and the organization of the large amount of data. To ensure the anonymity of the research participants, all interview data were anonymized. EfA staff members and girls are identified by number (e.g., Staff1, Girl2), and community members are identified by pseudonyms. Schooling levels are indicated as follows: lower secondary education, EfA1; upper secondary education (referred to as high school by participants), EfA2; and higher education, (EfA3).

Table 1
Research timeframe.

Timeframe	Research overview	Location
January – April 2014	Volunteering at the boarding houses as <i>participant-as-observer</i> 43 <i>Respondent-led photo-elicitation interviews (paired) with 75 girls</i> of the EfA project, to elicit the direct effect the project has on their lives 3 <i>Group drawing-elicitation exercises conducted with 26 girls</i> , to elicit the girls' future aspirations and perceptions of self 4 <i>Semi-structured interviews with staff members</i> of the EfA project, to explore how learning and empowerment is facilitated through the project	Boarding houses in Asni, Talat n'Yacoub and Ouirgane Short visits to communities and girls' homes
May – June 2014	<i>Participant observation</i> conducted in the local villages 63 <i>Semi-structured interviews with community members</i> , to assess the wider effects of the project on community development	Surrounding communities of EfA project

Note: Field diary kept throughout the research as part of researcher reflexivity.

The research process was guided by ethical considerations and accompanied by the maintenance of a field diary to reflect on the ethical, cultural and political implications of the study. Particular care was taken in the research conducted with school-aged children. The study did not interfere with children's school time. Girls had the opportunity to opt-into the study, instead of opting-out. Prior to the start of the project, the University Ethics Committee provided favorable opinion regarding the research design. The head of the EfA project provided approval and consent.

4. Education for all and empowerment

The Global Gender Gap Report 2016, which benchmarks countries' progress toward achieving gender parity across four broad themes, places Morocco in the lowest tier, ranking it 137th out of 144 countries (World Economic Forum, 2016). Though some improvements have taken place, large gender differences in educational attainment remain in rural communities. The country relies on a highly centralized system that secures access to and quality of education in urban areas, but works to a lesser degree in rural areas. As a rural teacher interviewed in this research explained,

“[T]his centralization affects not only culturally, but also materially, physically, all physical institutions, including schools, boarding schools, transportation, etc.. We still have a great shortage, which you wouldn't find in the city [...] where you can find five schools just one near another. Whereas here [...] in Asni we have many villages; Tamagounsi, Ourir, Aslda, Douar el Arab and others, and we have only one primary school.”

[(Abbud)]

The Moroccan Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) 2003/2004 (ICF International, 2005) show a large gender gap in educational attainment for the population aged younger than 30 living in the rural parts of the Marrakech-Safi region. Only 25 percent of women have some education, and among this group, just 20 percent continue with secondary or tertiary education. By comparison, of the 56 percent of men who have some education, 36 percent proceed to secondary or tertiary education. Both DHS data, and fieldwork undertaken for this study in 2014, indicate that gender inequality in educational attainment has increased over time in this region.

4.1. In/ability to make choices

In the patriarchal system of local Berber communities, gendered roles and responsibilities strongly influence perceptions of education. “The Berber culture refuses them [girls] to continue studying. People here like the girl just to know how to work at home, cooking, washing, just for getting married” (Aisha). Interviews from the research underscore the limited awareness about the role of formal education for girls, and the prevailing social norms that construct boys and girls as unequal in value: “[I]n Ourgane the people think that education is very important just for boys not for all” (Girl27, EfA1).

“There is a difference between girl and boy, everything that the boy can do and wants to do he will do. [...] He does not lose value, but the girl if she just does one mistake everyone talks about her and she loses value among people.”

[(Yasmine)]

Ouissal identifies gender differences as “a wrong idea, but because they [parents] have it from their [grand]parents they pass it on.” Gender-conforming behavior determines girls' value. They risk social stigmatization if they leave their village to further their education, due to the strong mediation by cultural (and religious) factors. “[A] family would sacrifice girl's education for fear that

would tarnish the reputation. Cultural values [...] mean some families think that marriage for girls is better than education” (Abbud). Life trajectories are mapped out along strictly gendered lines. “[T]he girls [have] seen the first one study and go to marry, so the others follow her, the first studying and stop and marry, [the second] studying and stop and marry” (Sabah). Similarly, Kabeer (2011, p. 519) finds that “marriage is still the only conceivable pathway to full adulthood for women, particularly in rural areas” of Bangladesh.

This influences women's sense of control over their life and the goals they choose. Many young Berber women have dropped out of school, due to their perceived limited capability to act outside this cultural framework. Sabah commented, “if she gets married she will just stay at home and there is no way for using her education in other things.” By contrast, education is also described as a prerequisite for women to “have an area, to have a place in society” (Ouissal). “[E]ducation gives women their position in society” (Safa), “a value in society” (Houda). “In the past it was okay if the woman was illiterate and the man literate, but now it creates inequality. The husband gives value to his wife, if she is educated” (Malina). These gendered inconsistencies create tensions. Increasing female education has the potential to unsettle traditional community structures, while the prevalent lack of female education reinforces unequal constructions of value and disempowerment. The younger generation particularly struggles with these paradoxical community discourses that complicate the value dimension of choice. “Nothing can be different, because I dropped out of school” (Mina). Another girl, who began staying at home after finishing primary school, said, “I lost my future” (Rachida).

“Women are at risk whether they obey the complex matrix of social rules and conventions or do not comply with the traditional roles [...]. The challenge is that both kinds of achievements [...] might be in accordance with the women's agency aspirations.”

[(Okkolin, 2016, p. 888)]

Girls' perceived (in)ability to make valued choices in life is influenced by the terms of recognition that underpin the unequal valuation of both genders. Of the respondents, 57 cited gender differences as a prevalent reason for unequal access to education. “The boys can finish their studies, but the girls no, because the parents fear for the girl” (Rajah). “For the men in her village it's not a problem to go to study, because he's a man. He can face any problems and solve them, but it's not the same for the girls” (Girl46, EfA1). The EfA project emerges as a unique opportunity in this context smoothing some of the main obstacles to girls' education. “In the beginning they [parents] refused me to come to Asni, because it's difficult for the girl, but after they know there is the EfA boarding house they let me come” (Girl72, EfA2).

4.2. Sense of community and friendship: Building confidence

Respondents attach multiple meanings to education as shown in Table 2 (the column on the right shows the number and the share of respondents supporting a particular theme). These beliefs are consistent with a view of education as a social need that transcends formal schooling (Unterhalter, 2008). Fifteen community respondents describe education as hope and life changes, while 13 of the 63 interviewed community members referred to a feeling of loss and regret of having no education. “Who loses education, loses everything in life. All women think that they are losing a lot of things without education” (Nouhaila). A general belief prevails that education will enable girls to change their (gendered) life trajectories. The mother of an EfA girl commented: “Maybe the girls can change the situation [...] and don't just stay at home like

Table 2

Reflections on the meaning of education.

Illustrative quotations of the meaning of education	Themes	No. of respondents (%)	
		EfA	Community
Girl41, EfA1: Education is essential, important for life; it's like the base. Hafiz: I sent my daughter to learn something in her life to benefit for her life.	<i>foundation for life</i>	16 (21%)	6 (10%)
Girl19, EfA1: Education helps us to realize our purpose in life and to finish our studies at the end. Rachida: I want to make my future. [I cannot do that without studies], because studies is everything.	<i>sense of purpose</i>	23 (31%)	1 (2%)
Girl42, EfA1: I like the subjects and when I get a good mark in mathematics, I feel better and in joy.	<i>self-fulfillment</i>	9 (12%)	10 (16%)
Aaliyah: I am going to [literacy classes] and I am very happy, because I have a second chance to read and write.	<i>aspirations</i>	21 (28%)	11 (18%)
Girl36, EfA1: My dreams can be realized thanks to studies and school. Ouissal: I want to go back to studies and have a different future; change the point of view about girls and studies.	<i>hope & life changes</i>	19 (25%)	15 (24%)
Girls 72, EfA2: Yeah, when I think of education I think that the future will be good. Ines: I hate illiteracy. I want my daughter to be more educated and I would not like her to stay at home and work at home, cleaning, cooking.	<i>friendship</i>	42 (56%)	3 (5%)
Girl16, EfA1: Education gives to me a relationship between girls and it changed my life. (Girl16, EfA1) Houda: They can learn a lot of things, because the girls are between the other girls.	<i>connection</i>	18 (24%)	6 (10%)
Girl12, EfA1: Education gives for her life the true relationship and love and happiness. Sadira: EfA is good for my daughter, because the girls help each other [...] and the responsible takes care of them.	<i>regret & loss</i>	1 (1%)	13 (21%)
Girl72, EfA2: My sisters said to me that I have to study; because they know [...] the pain the person feels who is not educated. Lamia: I don't feel good [...]. I regret that I didn't finish studies.			

their mothers or grandmothers" (Marya). "I come to EfA for studies, because I don't want to be like my parents who didn't go to school and didn't finish their studies" (Girl38, EfA1). The desire for a different life, however, requires a more critical engagement with the intersection of cultural expectations, aspirations and social learning.

Social learning motivates the meanings attached to education in the boarding houses, and through these processes connections, aspirations and a shared sense of purpose in life can develop. Forty-two of the 75 interviewed girls recurrently described education as friendship. "EfA means friendship and new girls in my life" (Girl 23, EfA1). This is consistent with the pictures the girls identified as their favorite ones as part of the photo-elicitation interviews. More than half (37 of 65) of the chosen pictures displayed the theme of friendship. The girls come from villages and households with similar characteristics, and their mutuality of experience of constraint and aspiration allows them to bond closely. "[T]hey are all like sisters" (Girl75, EfA3). "EfA provides the opportunity for girls [...] to develop their personality, to know other girls from different parts and to meet foreign people" (Abbud). This study observes that the expansion of peer networks leads to a layering of the girls' sense of community, as they become part of a new friend, school and EfA community.

The girls' sense of belonging to a peer group provides them with a support system to confront the tensions and risks commonly associated to girls' education. "The other girls encouraged her not to be afraid" (Girl58, EfA1). "There are some things you can't tell anybody [...] but here the girls are the same age, and [in] the same situation, and they can maybe understand you" (Girl72, EfA2). Their friendship ties constitute a sense of collective confidence. "[Her experiences] gave her trust for everyone in the [boarding] house" (Girl 54, EfA1). The confidence experienced in groups enhances the girls' self-confidence and allows them to develop

an alternative sense of being in the world. "I learned a lot of things like how to communicate with other girls and self-confidence" (Girl11, EfA1). "Self-confidence is very important for growing up in life and for realizing her dreams" (Girl36, EfA1). Through these processes their sense of self and how they feel in relation to others changes. "In the past I never thought that I would be able to talk to people. [...] Now I have more confidence in myself, I can talk to you" (Girl75, EfA3).

These findings suggest that the relational experiences of education motivate changes from within at the individual level of the empowerment model (see Fig. 1). This insight underscores the importance of understanding the spaces and forms of learning that can facilitate empowerment in youth transitions. Attention now turns to the social learning environment characterizing the EfA project.

4.3. Self-efficacy: Increasing sense of control

The girls share the same purpose in life, i.e., to finish their studies. "I like the relationship between the other girls in this place, because we have the same purpose that is education" (Girl8, EfA1). Twenty-three girls referred to a form of purposeful agency (see Table 2) that rests on internal motivation and self-belief as identified by Klein's (2014) study of empowerment. However, purposeful agency is experienced in relationships in which collectively held values are shared, such as academic achievement, solidarity and mutual respect. This intersects with Hall's (2017, p. 68) conception of joint capabilities, which "recognize communally held values regarding who groups want to be and what they want to do." Girl36 (EfA1) emphasizes the value of academic achievement, "I like this girl, because she has a good behavior and she is the first in her class". Shared values influence the girls' motivation to engage in learning and to improve themselves. "[W]hen one of

the girls sees that another one has a purpose in life or she studies to realize it, also the other girls want to be like her” (Staff3).

Relational experiences of agency can lead to a wider collective belief that actions can be produced. “[W]e started to believe in ourselves, and we started wanting to change [...] We started to have different views, we started to think more about the future” (Girl75, EfA3). The emphasis on changing thought patterns, e.g., “think more about the future,” alludes to a potential shift in the prevalent value set and/or sense of control. The girls’ educational aspirations diverge from the cultural expectations of gender in their communities. “My father [...] wants me to drop out of school. I want to finish, [but] my father has the idea that girls should stay at home” (Girl38, EfA1). “People [in the community] say to my father that it is not good to send the girls to study in Asni. [...] My father will belief them [...], if he hears something bad about me” (Girl66, EfA2). Considerations of upholding family honor become enmeshed with, and may conflict with, increasing feelings of confidence and a growing desire for self-realization. This situation could lead to a potential re-arrangement or re-negotiation of previously unquestioned values with self-efficacy beliefs playing an important role in these processes.

Efficacy beliefs are not synonymous with outcome expectancies (Bandura, 1997), but they influence the girls’ self-regulatory capacity and sense of control. Their capacity development is based on a variety of learning experiences that allow them to acquire different competencies, including time-management skills, learning and coping strategies. “They [EfA] have rules to revise [study] every night, and his daughter revises as a habit every day” (Jalal). “Everything in the boarding house has a time, has a system, the time of going to school, the time for doing homework, the time of doing any other activities” (Girl21, EfA1). The girls learn to solve problems, and they are encouraged to learn from their failures. Developing coping strategies is key to managing setbacks and building resilience (Bandura, 2006). “In the [EfA] home I am able to have a solution for any problem” (Girl17, EfA1). “I had a bad mark and she [housemother] said, ‘You don’t have to cry and be sad. No, you have to be confident, [...] strong and you have to work hard for obtaining a good mark’” (Girl69, EfA2). This view fosters increasing feelings of competence that are elaborated and experienced in collaboration with others through peer-to-peer learning. “[W]hen one of the girls doesn’t understand a question or exercise, we help each other to have a solution for the exercise” (Girl47, EfA1). “Friends are very important in studies, because they help each other” (Girl32, EfA1).

The internalization of these strategies can have wider effects on their perceived control over life choices, and shows the dynamics between learning and becoming. “The organization they get [...] affects and has a great influence on the girls themselves, which will have an effect surely on their life” (Abbud). “The system of EfA is good, because I organize my time. [...] This can help me in my future for organizing my life” (Girl45, EfA1). The building of solidarity among the girls strengthens their collective voice (see also Charrad, 2011). This can support them in questioning and/or resisting common gender norms and values, as illustrated in the case of Girl38 (EfA1), who is continuing her education despite her father’s disapproval. Similarly, Girl72 (EfA2) argued, “They [parents] have the idea that the best for the girls in our village is to stay home and marry. [...] I refused, because the girl should go to school and study, if she wants to.” The complex and synergetic experiences of perceived self-/collective-efficacy, purposive agency and competence have a positive influence on these processes. Such experiences allow girls to develop voice and aspirations through strengthening their sense of control and collective purpose. These can be considered preconditions to express demands in different realms of society (Unterhalter, 2008). Mentoring can reinforce

some of the aforementioned processes, but also acts as an empowering relationship in itself.

4.4. Mentoring

Many girls arriving at the EfA project cannot speak Arabic, which is the main language of instruction in school. A local teacher observed, “girls come without the necessary knowledge, even basic education like writing their own names, many students don’t know” (Abbud). The EfA project provides a crucial environment for the girls to master the transition from primary to secondary school. The housemother tells them, “I can speak Arabic, but for you, you can respond in Berber, I understand, for the girls to learn” (Staff1). The advice and assistance received further strengthens their volition and abstraction skills. Twenty-two EfA respondents emphasized the role of guidance, and 41 respondents highlighted the role of support in mentoring relationships.

“I think she [housemother] has the biggest role [...] when we started we didn’t know even how to dress very well, how to eat [...] with the fork [...]. We were in a place, we didn’t know anybody, we didn’t know how they talk, how they live their lives [...] we had never heard about [secondary school] and she was aware.”

[(Girl75, EfA3)]

While their parents represent the first line of mentoring, i.e., “the first source of education” (Girl63, EfA2), the housemothers play a crucial role in the girls’ socialization at school. Girl75 (EfA3) emphasized, “The most important thing if you want to change is that you have to find somebody who understands you.” The older girls further help the younger ones to integrate. “When I came to EfA I stayed alone, but this girl said to me to say hello to other girls [...] and then I had a good relation” (Girls36, EfA1). “The older friends like [name of girl] can encourage me to meet new people” (Girl53, EfA1). This builds the foundation of the initial phase of mentoring described as initiation. Mentoring is developmentally based, and after the initiation phase the cultivation of a mentoring relationship follows (Kram, 1983).

The psychosocial dimension of mentoring takes place when mentors listen and become aware of their mentees’ lifeworlds. The emotional support received from older peers plays an important role in this process. “[T]hey also help in difficult times. It’s not just in studies, but also in my personal life” (Girl32, EfA1). This voluntary form of mentoring (see Mullen, 2012) holistically nurtures the girls, and encourages them to seek out new knowledge. For example, the housemother comments, “I have the same family that you have [...] but now it’s not the question of luck/opportunity. It’s the question of what you choose” (Staff1). Empowering mentor-mentee relationships function along the continuum of control and choice (see Fig. 1). The housemother described this as letting the girls attending high school “feel their responsibility” of choice through a more autonomous learning and living environment.

“When the girls were small I saw myself as a mother [...] now I see them as women. [...] I leave them the responsibility to do their studies, it’s their life and it’s their future. I give them the responsibility to feel that.”

[(Staff3)]

Mentoring can support identity transformations by giving the girls “the openness towards the world” (Staff3). The girls learn about their Berber culture. “[W]e have one Amazigh [Berber] culture, but in every village we do practice Amazigh culture in a different way” (Girl67, EfA2). This strengthens the girls’ cultural

identity (see Zimmerman et al., 2011). They also learn about other cultures from the international volunteers. “[T]hey [volunteers] are open about their culture and they speak about their country” (Staff3). Most of the volunteers come from a Western country context, which is usually characterized by more individualistic cultures. These tend to emphasize “self-reliance, independence, and creativity,” whereas collectivist cultures favor “obedience, reliability, and proper behavior” (Triandis, 1989, p. 510). Volunteer-organized activities, such as painting, emphasize the creative element of learning. Girl51 (EfA1) commented, “The first time I said, I cannot paint, [but then] I was surprised.” These experiences of mastery influence the girls’ self-perception (see Bandura, 2006). Intercultural relationships further have a formative effect, because they expose the girls to alternative conceptions of gender. “They learn [...] that girls at their age in other countries would never marry; it’s not a goal in their life” (Staff1).

“[A]lways in their discussions, there is the woman and what she does in Europe, in Asni or in Morocco. These are the discussions always between the volunteer and the girls, and that’s important, because that also forces the girls to continue their studies and to go far.”

[(Staff3)]

This reflects the important but potentially conflicting role that mentoring from non-Islamic individuals plays in altering and/or instilling different values. Capacity development relies strongly on more knowledgeable others who assist and guide the girls in navigating these cultural specificities and potential (dis)continuities.

4.5. Observational learning

The housemother describes the secondary school phase as the most challenging, “we lose the girls for marriage in the ages between 12 to 15” (Staff1). Child marriage is one of the main reasons girls drop out of or are excluded from school (Wilson, 2004). Girls in the Berber villages usually get married around the age of 14, 15 or 16.

“[G]irls are studying, but not really, because the impact of the family and of society and other cultural parameters are stronger. [...] Especially in villages, [...] early marriage, even if [...] the family code now insists on the fact that girls should be 18 to get married [...] many people try to [marry] at 16 or even 15.”

[(Abbud)]

Being exposed to alternative ideas and ideals plays a crucial role in developing aspirations, while a lack of role models is associated with missing understanding of opportunities among adolescents (Green, 2010). “In my village [...] I have never seen a girl who has realized her dreams,” while “boys, everyone works to realize his dreams” (Sabah). Role models encourage and inspire the girls’ process of becoming through the observational and experiential function of learning. The prevalent absence of (female) role models in the local villages explains why role-modeling functions are less pronounced in the community context in Table 3. Nevertheless, community responses indicate that educated girls are becoming new role models within their communities.

Role models do not remove the impact that the family and community have on girls’ formation of thought, but they can inspire new response patterns. Twenty-three girls emphasized the role of observational learning (see Bandura, 1977), which is closely related to the function of imitation highlighted by 16 girls. “It is important for the girls to see what her models do, to be a role model for them” (Staff2). Alternative role models widen associational preferences, which are shaped by those people that are most often observed, for example schoolteachers. “I took this picture of the teacher of Arabic, because I see myself in the future being the teacher of Arabic” (Girl31, EfA1). Nineteen girls cited inspiration and encouragement as key role-modeling functions. Role models instill a desire for becoming that strengthens the girls’ belief in their own capacity for change. “When I see a role model I can face any difficulties to be like her, like the role model” (Girl49, EfA1).

The girls’ aspiration to be like or imitate their role models motivates self-development. Bussey and Bandura (1999, p. 692) refer to this as social modeling, arguing that “models transmit knowledge, skills and strategies for managing environmental demands” or challenges. The achievement of others that the girls can relate to, is illustrative of their own potential capacities (Bandura, 1997). This can raise personal efficacy beliefs, which would explain how role models support the girls in overcoming difficulties in their life. They instill the belief that the girls can exert action or follow a certain life path. This aspirational function strengthens the girls’ capacity to aspire.

4.6. Capacity to aspire

The spatial and social duality characterizing the local Berber villages describes women’s “place” as the home; interviews with 48 community members and 31 EfA respondents emphasized this view. “[R]eligion gives a lot of rules. The women should just stay

Table 3
Role modeling functions.

Illustrative quotations of role modeling functions	Themes	No. of respondents (%)	
		EfA	Community
Girl20, EfA1: I learned from the volunteer a lot of things and when the volunteer does something, I also want to do like that. Aamir: My daughter will be a good example and she will help others here for [accessing] education.	observational learning	23 (31%)	7 (11%)
Girl33, EfA1: Role models play a really important role for the life of children to realize their dreams and maybe to be also a teacher in the future. Duha: I want to be an idol [role model] for these girls; this is my goal, to encourage the girls to finish their studies.	inspiration & encouragement	19 (25%)	7 (11%)
Girl59, EfA2: I want to become a teacher, because one of the volunteers in the boarding house gave us English classes in the first year of secondary school. Faizah: There is less fear, because now people see more girls that are finishing studies and nothing has happened to them.	experiential learning	11 (15%)	6 (10%)
Girl31, EfA1: I took this picture of my teacher of Arabic, because I see myself in the future being the teacher of Arabic. Rajah: She can be a role model for the other girls; all the girls can also finish studies and be like her.	imitation	16 (21%)	3 (5%)

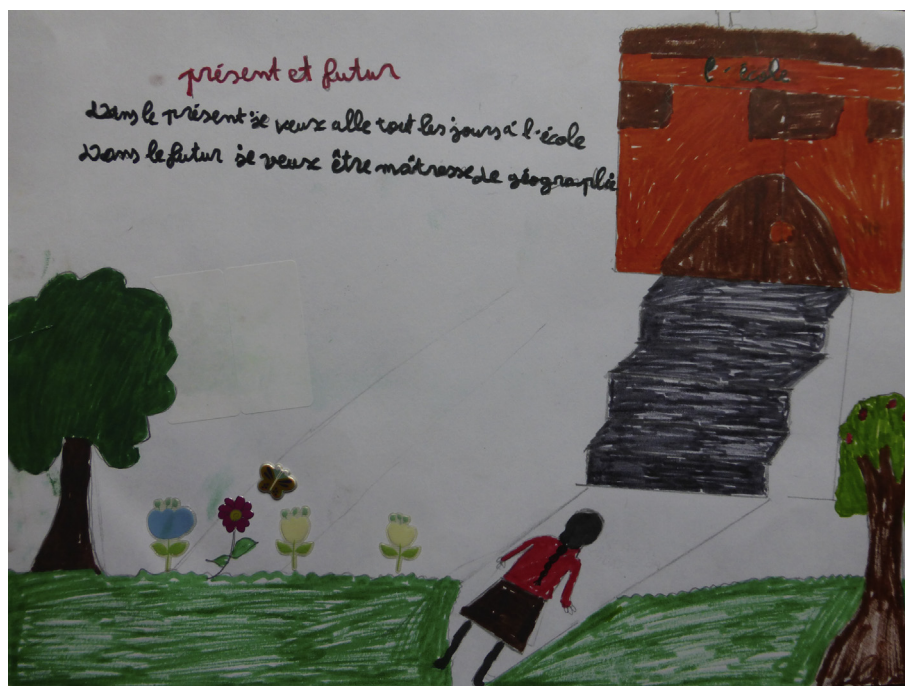


Fig. 2. Present-future continuum (Drawing by Girl21, EfA1).



Fig. 3. Integrating work and family (Drawing by Girl27, EfA1).

at home and pray, not go outside [...]. It's not possible [...] not acceptable" (Aida). Mustafa further argued, "Everyone says the girl is a weak person, she has a weak personality [...]. Berber people don't want women to contact with other people." Women's seclusion and restricted mobility is justified by sociocultural practices and religious beliefs that partly rest on essentialized gender attributes. "Boys can fight for themselves [...] they are not like the girls, who are weak" (Rachida). The internalization of these gender discourses affects women's perception of legitimate behavior, which

further intersects with their capacity to aspire. Many girls in the Berber villages fail to develop the capacity to aspire. "There are no [female role] models" (Duha). "They have no goal to realize" (Sabah). Role models (and mentors) shape the emotional geographies of aspirations.

This research employed a drawing exercise to capture the girls' present self-perceptions and future aspirations. Eighteen of the 26 girls who participated in the drawing activity aspired to become a teacher. Four wanted to become a doctor. Two painted themselves

as engineers. Two drawings did not depict a clear career choice. Most of the paintings were drawn in form of a continuum in which the present and future were either painted in a similar fashion, or with the present representing simultaneously the future, as illustrated in the painting entitled “present and future” by Girl21 (EfA1) in Fig. 2.

The girls’ drawings did not depict their community, family or children. Only one girl painted herself with children in the future, as illustrated in Fig. 3. While youth transitions are fluid (see Thomson & Holland, 2002), they are structured by the terms of recognition that shape women’s participation in community life. This is expressed through the girls’ difficulty in integrating their “occupational choices [...] with their life choices, such as the decision to marry and have children” (Eccles, 1994, p. 605). DeJaeghere (2016) emphasizes the roles of social recognition and affiliation in assessing the dialectical relationship between agency and aspirations. The girls might experience a sense of control over the outcomes that education and learning can bring to their lives, e.g., becoming a doctor or moving to the city. However, this does not imply control over the wider generational and gender hierarchies that might frame their aspirations. Here, conscientization plays an important role in effectuating wider change.

4.7. Conscientization

This study shows that access to capacity-building projects and the networks they facilitate can enable girls in reaching their educational goals. However, their education and sense of empowerment can also have wider effects on community development through processes of conscientization. Educated girls “will bring a new philosophy to the village [and] try to develop the village” (Hassan). Many EfA girls are the first girls from their village to continue their education beyond primary school. “I am the first girl in my douar [neighborhood] who comes to [EfA] and studies in the first year of Baccalaureate” (Girl59, EfA2). Chaimae comments that her niece “is the first girl who continued to secondary school and high school, after her there were more girls.” The girls are beginning to demystify the negative connotations associated to female education. “Before there was no girl going to Asni to study. So when I went, all the girls saw that I am going to Asni, it’s okay, nothing happened” (Girl72, EfA2).

They embody change by showing others that education can strengthen girls’ respectability in society. “When you have just one girl who finishes studies she can be like a role model for the other girls who come to finish studies. People respect her, because she succeeds in all her studies” (Safa). “They can encourage the others to access school, like the young and also the old. They want to be more patient to study and to learn” (Zaida). This alludes to the role-modeling functions highlighted in Table 3. The EfA girls are embodying and symbolizing female agency within their communities. They have become “role model[s] for other girls; all the girls can also finish studies and be like them” (Rajah). Similarly, the housemother commented, “if one girl in the village went to study, she becomes like a model for other girls and all the girls want to be like her” (Staff4). Even the girls have not yet returned to their communities, they have had a salient effect on their communities through these processes of multi-layered role modeling, as underscored by comments from 20 interview respondents. “Most of the men now want to send their girls to school, because when her daughter [attending EfA] comes to [name of village], they give her daughter as a role model” (Sadira).

These processes have inspired the image of an educated woman in community consciousness. At the collective level, feelings of appreciation can ensue. “When people see that her granddaughter finishes studies they can be proud” (Amal). The families of the girls and their peers are starting to see the difference between an edu-

cated woman and those that have barely had access to education. “People have really changed [...] if [EfA] wasn’t there people wouldn’t get the difference between a girl who has completed her studies and a girl who has just started and has husband and family” (Girl75, EfA). Zahara observed, “There is a difference when my daughter stays in EfA and goes to the secondary school or when she stays at home.” The girls have a “much stronger personality, which means much more presence in society” (Abbud). This has led to an incipient shift in community members’ perception of what girls can be and do. “Before me there was no girl to complete her studies. [...] I have changed their thought about education, I have changed their thought about the girl” (Girl75, EfA3).

Conscientization in this context problematizes the way gender and gender relations are understood. “I want the situation, the position of women to change [...], if women are educated [...] society will change” (Mustafa). This can lead to a wider change in the actual freedoms enjoyed by girls and women in the region (see Sen, 1999). “No freedom without education, if you are educated you will live your freedom as you want” (Ines). Over time, this can strengthen the cultural capacity to aspire among groups establishing a link between capacity and capability by disrupting traditionalist gender perspectives, such as the view that women should stay at home. “In the past you would never see a woman, now you see her and [...] in the future they will have a big change, because now the girls go to study [...] this will change the memory” (Mustafa). “Educated girls will make the village more dynamic [...] and create places for women to work” (Zineb). This might lead to an incremental cultural shift that moves the communities toward more accepted mutually beneficial roles for both women and men in society.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to a rethinking of community capacity building by adopting an original approach based on social cognitive theory. It explores the link between social learning, relationships and cultural context in bringing about change. This understanding builds the basis of an empowerment model of capacity building that highlights the complex interconnections between different levels of empowerment, community capacity and social learning. Capacity building and empowerment levels are often studied in isolation with a predominant focus on the individual. There is, however, growing interest in understanding relational and multi-dimensional underpinnings of agency (Christens, 2012; Hall, 2017; Rao, 2017; Shah, 2016). This research incorporates notions of culture and social learning into the study of agency extending Sen’s (1985) definition to understand the relational acts through which empowerment and education acquire their value and meaning.

The empowerment model of capacity building emphasizes the interplay between informal and formal learning processes in shaping situated meanings of education. Findings show that peer networks function as a framework and context based on shared understandings, group aspirations and collective confidence in which capacity development can be studied. The cultural specificity of these processes determines the desirability and feasibility of different kinds of empowerment. Gender ideology forms an integral part of the terms of recognition, which emerge as a disempowering factor in this study based on the unequal valuation of boys and girls. The “idea of women” that prevails in particular contexts is key to constructing gender identities (Okkolin, 2016). These are intricately interwoven with the perceived availability of choices, and the ability to act. Changes from within hence start with a critical engagement with those unquestioned facets of gender identity. This requires attention to the ways in which individuals and

groups negotiate, resist or challenge seemingly contrasting terms of recognition to achieve meaningful choices in life.

Expanding the girls' capacity to aspire represents a powerful tool in this context; it establishes a dialectical relationship between agency aspirations and previously unquestioned values or beliefs. Appadurai (2004) describes the capacity to aspire as a cultural and future-oriented capacity that has its origins in social activity. Positive relationships with significant others, including mentors and role models, can have an aspirational function and strengthen individuals' belief in their own capacity for change. Findings show that social modeling can motivate the agency-unlocking role of aspirations (see Bandura, 1997; Conradie & Robeyns, 2013). The effects of social learning extend from the EfA project to the wider community. An incipient change at the collective level of conscientization was observed through processes of multi-layered role modeling. These processes have raised awareness in community members' perception of the girl and her potential contributing to the disruption of female educational deprivation in some of the Berber villages. However, the findings of the study are project related and context specific. Thus, drawing general recommendations is difficult.

More studies exploring gender relationships and capacity-building processes are required to strengthen the theoretical propositions made in this study. Medium- and long-term studies are particularly needed to understand the deeper transformations of the often-intransigent terms of recognition and how this can, in turn, affect and contribute to community capacity. In this particular case, the ways in which the benefits from mentoring and role modeling can be leveraged require further attention. The development of mentoring relationships and wider collaborative platforms within local communities could provide additional opportunities for gender empowerment at all levels of education and within the working society. Understanding the social embeddedness and networked nature of education to advance capacity building and empowerment goals is particularly important in communities that have low levels of education and lack frameworks for delivery of educational content.

Conflict of interest

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